NATIONAL LEADERSHIP INDEX 2008

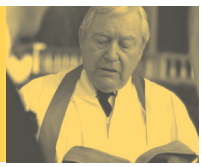
SPECIAL REPORTS

Presidential Leadership
Election Coverage 2008

A NATIONAL STUDY

OF CONFIDENCE

IN LEADERSHIP



HARVARD Kennedy School
Center for Public
LEADERSHIP

In collaboration with the Merriman River Group

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U.S.News & World Report

The National Study of Confidence in Leadership provides a quantitative foundation to the "America's Best Leaders" project—a collaboration between the Center for Public Leadership and *U.S.News & World Report*. Since 2005, the Center has annually conducted a rigorous process to identify some of the country's preeminent leaders; the winners, hailing from all sectors of society, have then been honored in a special fall issue of the magazine. The Center is grateful to *U.S. News* for its help in promoting awareness of leadership for the common good.

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INTRODUCTION

November 2008

This year, with a presidential election to decide and a deepening fiscal crisis to solve, America's leadership crisis has become front-page news.

The *National Leadership Index 2008* offers compelling new evidence of our nation's dissatisfaction with its leadership. Eighty percent of Americans now believe that the U.S. faces a leadership crisis, up from 65 percent in 2005, the study's first year. This vote of no confidence extends far beyond distrust of the executive branch and business leaders. Confidence in the leadership of five other groups—Congress, organized religion, education, the Supreme Court, and state government—fell more sharply in the past year than ever before. And, for the fourth year in a row, Americans express low levels of confidence in the media. Military and medical leadership are the only sectors for which Americans express at least a moderate amount of confidence.

Given the historic levels of dissatisfaction with the executive branch, we sought this year to better understand what leadership approaches Americans value most in a president. This year's survey asked respondents to choose between alternative conceptions of good presidential leadership, and found that liberals, moderates, and conservatives differ markedly in the importance they place on certain presidential leadership approaches. Yet we also found majority support for many basic elements of presidential leadership—for example, building alliances around the world, using the military only to defend the United States, sharing power equally with Congress and the Supreme Court, and making decisions based on what is fair.

Despite their grave concerns about the nation's current leadership, Americans also see hope for the future. A plurality, 39 percent, believe things will be better after the 2008 election. They may be looking to the presidency not only to solve pressing problems but to restore the nation's confidence in itself and its leadership throughout society's major sectors. To further explore how a change in presidential leadership might influence public perceptions of leadership across sectors, we plan to publish a special *National Leadership Index* survey in June 2009.

In these difficult times, it's more important than ever to find ways to engage in deep conversation about effective leadership for the common good. We hope that this project, and a companion project on exemplary American leadership, "America's Best Leaders" (See *U.S.News & World Report*, November 24, 2008), will contribute to that dialogue, and we welcome your thoughts and comments.

David Gergen
Director

Andy Zelleke
Co-Director

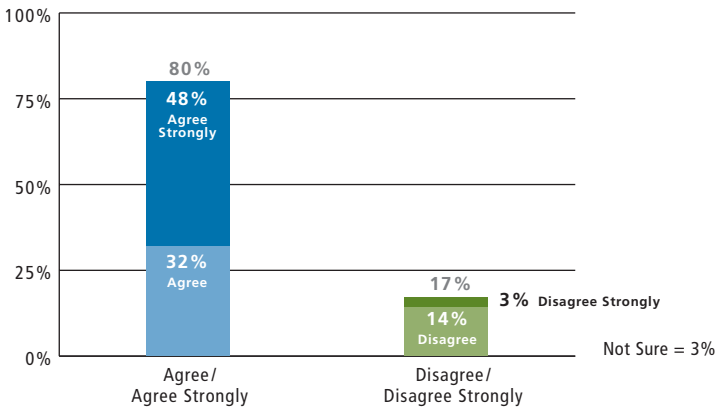
Donna Kalikow
Executive Director

SECTION 1 CONFIDENCE IN LEADERSHIP 2008

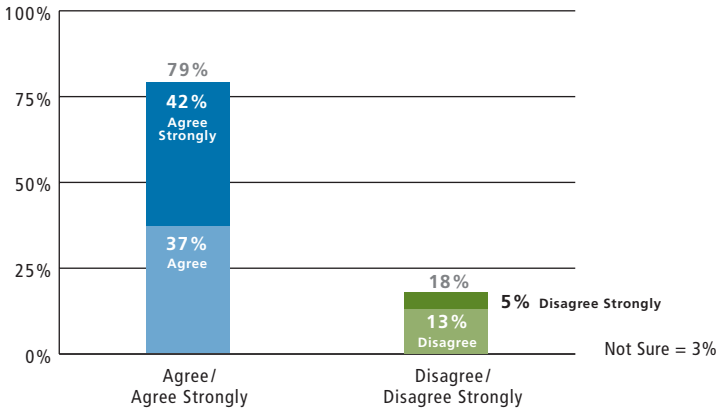
Americans have a crisis of confidence in their leaders

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

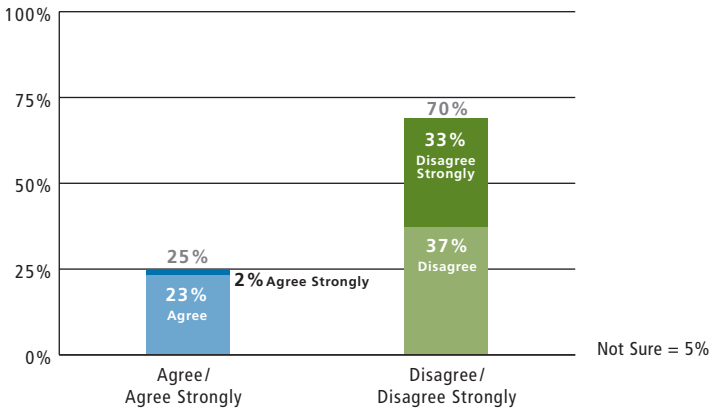
We have a leadership crisis in the country today



Unless we get better leaders, the United States will decline as a nation



Overall, our country's leaders are effective and do a good job

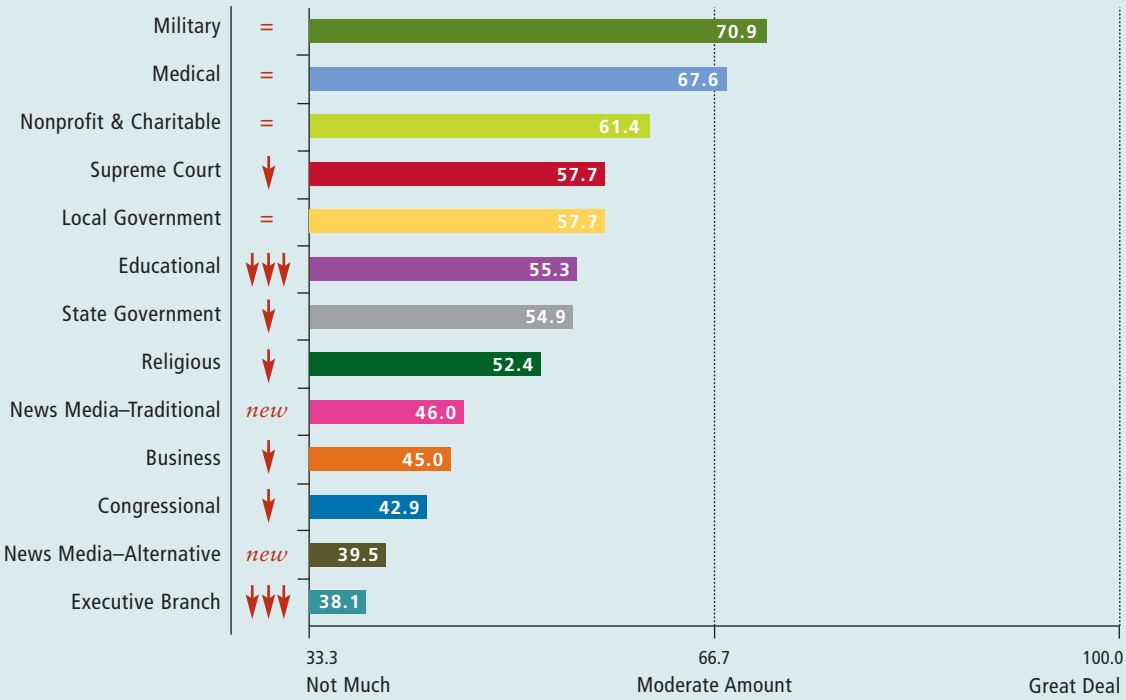


- 80% of Americans *agree* or *agree strongly* that "we have a leadership crisis in the country today"—a 3% increase from 2007 and a 15% increase from 2005
- As in 2007, 79% *agree* or *agree strongly* that "unless we get better leaders, the U.S. will decline as a nation"—a 6% increase from 2006
- Only 25% of Americans *agree* or *agree strongly* that "the country's leaders are effective and do a good job"

NATIONAL LEADERSHIP INDEX 2008

How much confidence do you have in the leadership of the following sectors, a great deal, a moderate amount, not much, or none at all?

Range: 0 (*none at all*) – 100 (*a great deal*)



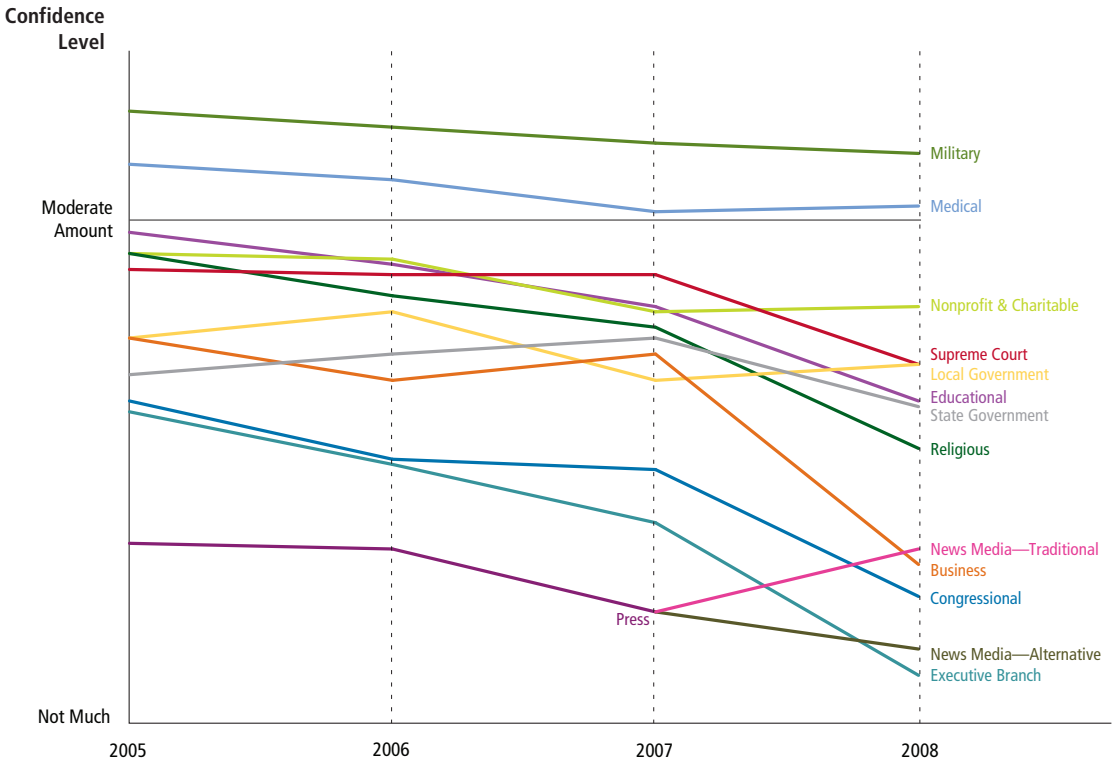
↓ indicates a statistically significant decrease from 2007

↓↓↓ indicates a statistically significant decrease three years in a row

= indicates no significant change from 2007

new indicates a new question for 2008

LEADERSHIP CONFIDENCE BY SECTOR, YEAR-TO-YEAR



Key Findings

- Confidence in the leaders of seven sectors—business, Executive Branch, Congress, religious, educational, Supreme Court, and state government—has fallen sharply in the past year. Confidence in the leaders of each of these sectors experienced its largest decrease since the survey began in 2005.
- Confidence in business leaders dropped more than did confidence in leaders of any other sector.
- Confidence in the Supreme Court dropped for the first time since the inception of this survey. This decrease is fully attributable to Democrats' decreased confidence in the Supreme Court.
- Confidence in the Executive Branch and educational leaders has declined for three years in a row.
- As in 2007, the only sectors of leadership in which Americans have more than a moderate amount of confidence are military and medical leadership, and for the fourth year in a row, military leadership inspires the most confidence.
- Confidence is higher in leadership of the traditional news media than in leadership of alternative forms of news media.
- Confidence held steady from 2007 for military, medical, nonprofit & charitable, and local government leaders.
- For the third year in a row, there were no statistically significant increases in confidence in any sector's leaders.

SECTION 2

PRESIDENTIAL LEADERSHIP

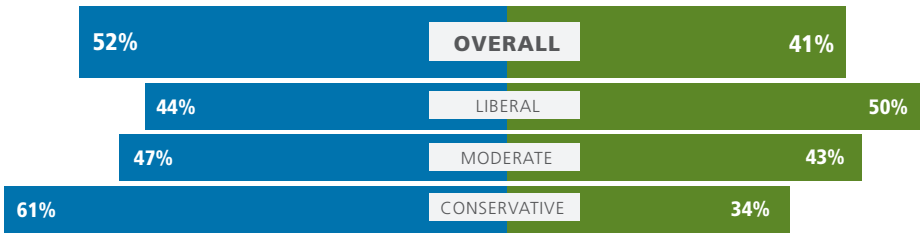
Survey respondents were asked how they believe presidents, in general, should lead. They chose between alternate conceptions of good presidential leadership that are often debated by the public and media. Topics included (1) presidential leadership traits, (2) presidential power and autonomy, (3) presidential philosophy of government, and (4) presidential public engagement.

In your opinion, which of these would you say is more important to you in American presidents? That presidents….

LEADERSHIP TRAITS 1.1

A Lead based on moral beliefs about what is right and wrong

B Lead based on practical beliefs about what works and doesn't work

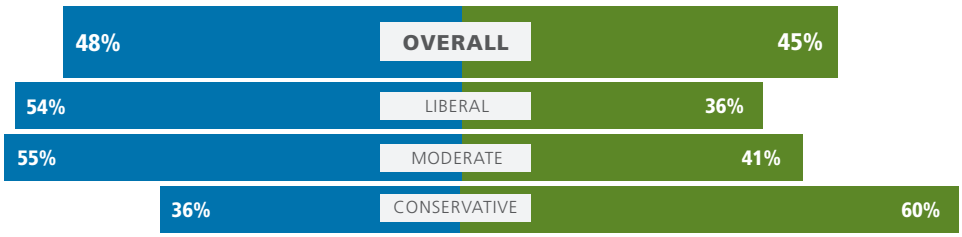


	BOTH EQUALLY	DON'T KNOW
Overall	4%	3%
Liberal	4%	2%
Moderate	5%	5%
Conservative	3%	2%

LEADERSHIP TRAITS 1.2

A Are always respectful and diplomatic

B Are willing to offend people and make enemies when they think it's necessary

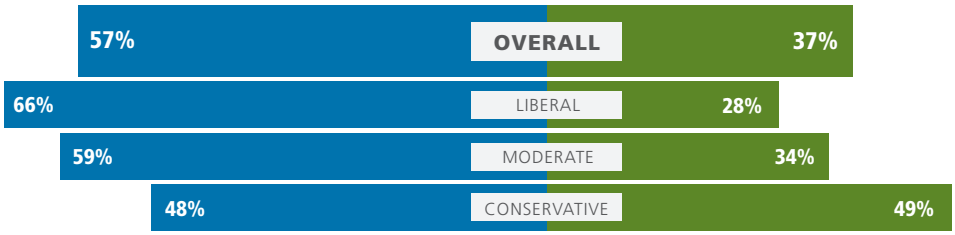


	BOTH EQUALLY	DON'T KNOW
Overall	3%	4%
Liberal	2%	8%
Moderate	2%	2%
Conservative	2%	2%

LEADERSHIP TRAITS 1.3

A Keep religious faith a personal or private matter

B Express religious faith in public

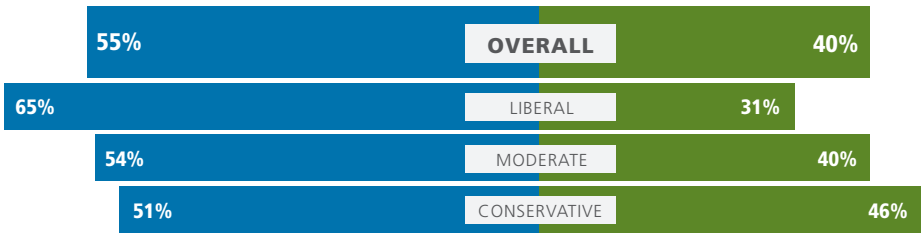


	BOTH EQUALLY	DON'T KNOW
Overall	2%	4%
Liberal	1%	5%
Moderate	4%	3%
Conservative	1%	2%

POWER AND AUTONOMY 2.1

A Do what the majority of Americans think is right

B Do what they think is right

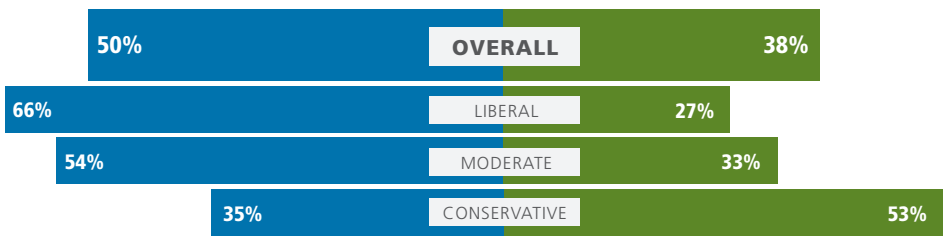


	BOTH EQUALLY	DON'T KNOW
Overall	2%	3%
Liberal	2%	2%
Moderate	3%	3%
Conservative	1%	2%

POWER AND AUTONOMY 2.2

A Ensure that America is respected for its fairness

B Ensure that America is respected for its strength

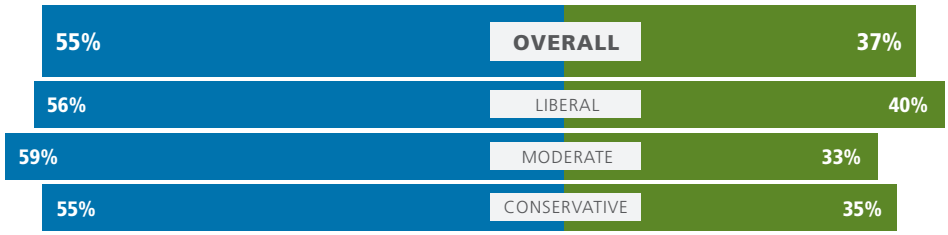


	BOTH EQUALLY	DON'T KNOW
Overall	10%	2%
Liberal	4%	3%
Moderate	9%	4%
Conservative	9%	3%

POWER AND AUTONOMY 2.3

A Are never willing to be unethical or bend the rules

B Are willing to be unethical or bend the rules when they think it's necessary



	BOTH EQUALLY	DON'T KNOW
Overall	2%	6%
Liberal	1%	3%
Moderate	2%	6%
Conservative	3%	7%

POWER AND AUTONOMY 2.4

A Share power equally with Congress and the Supreme Court

B Have more power than Congress and the Supreme Court

	BOTH EQUALLY	DON'T KNOW
Overall	4%	2%
Liberal	4%	1%
Moderate	3%	1%
Conservative	2%	5%

POWER AND AUTONOMY 2.5

A Believe that other countries may have different but equally acceptable ways of life

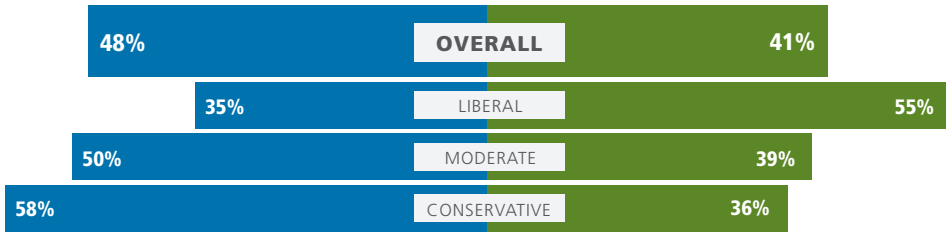
B Believe that the United States has a superior way of life to other countries

	BOTH EQUALLY	DON'T KNOW
Overall	1%	3%
Liberal	0%	4%
Moderate	2%	2%
Conservative	1%	3%

PHILOSOPHY OF GOVERNMENT 3.1

A Protect the public's safety, even if it infringes on their freedom

B Protect the public's freedom, even if it infringes on their safety

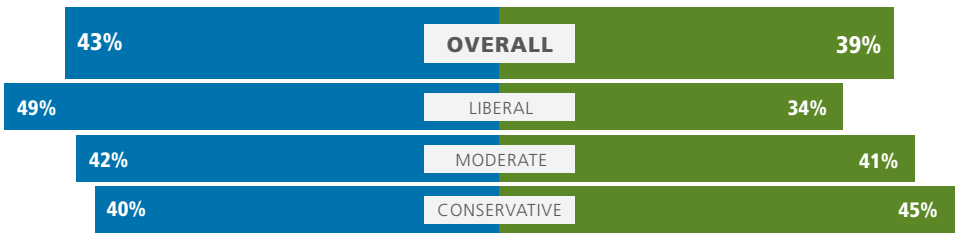


	BOTH EQUALLY	DON'T KNOW
Overall	5%	6%
Liberal	3%	7%
Moderate	5%	6%
Conservative	3%	3%

PHILOSOPHY OF GOVERNMENT 3.2

A Put the needs of future generations of Americans first

B Put the needs of today's Americans first



	BOTH EQUALLY	DON'T KNOW
Overall	13%	5%
Liberal	11%	6%
Moderate	11%	6%
Conservative	14%	1%

PHILOSOPHY OF GOVERNMENT 3.3

A Use the military only to defend America and react to enemy attacks

B Use the military to actively further America's interests in the world

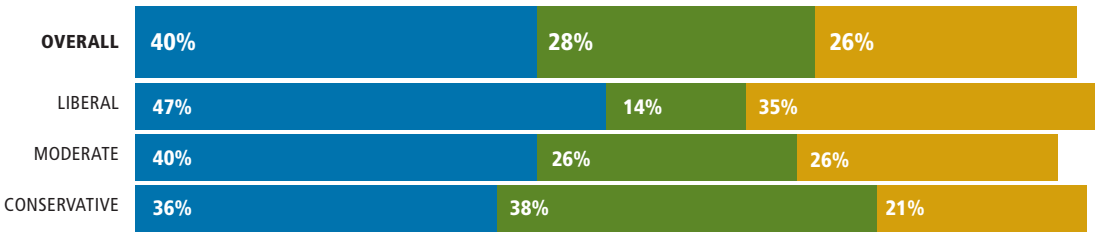
	BOTH EQUALLY	DON'T KNOW
Overall	4%	4%
Liberal	2%	3%
Moderate	4%	3%
Conservative	6%	3%

PHILOSOPHY OF GOVERNMENT 3.4

A Use the government's power to make the country a fair place in which Americans can compete

B Reduce the government's power to allow Americans succeed and fail on their own

C Use the government's power to directly solve problems that many Americans face



	ALL EQUALLY	DON'T KNOW
Overall	2%	4%
Liberal	0%	4%
Moderate	2%	6%
Conservative	2%	3%

PHILOSOPHY OF GOVERNMENT 3.5

A Build mutual alliances with other countries

B Keep America out of the affairs of other countries as much as possible

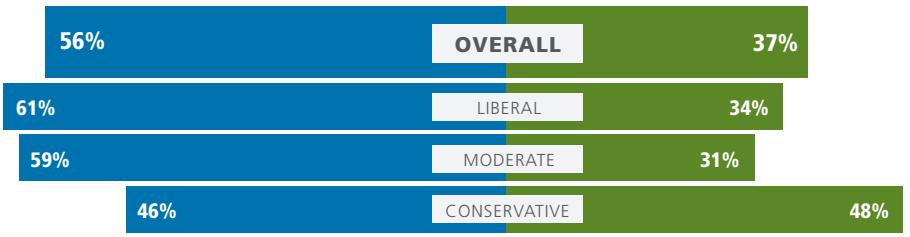
C Assert America's power and influence over other countries

	ALL EQUALLY	DON'T KNOW
Overall	2%	2%
Liberal	0%	0%
Moderate	2%	0%
Conservative	3%	2%

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT 4.1

A Focus on uniting people, even if it slows progress

B Focus on accomplishing goals, even if it divides people

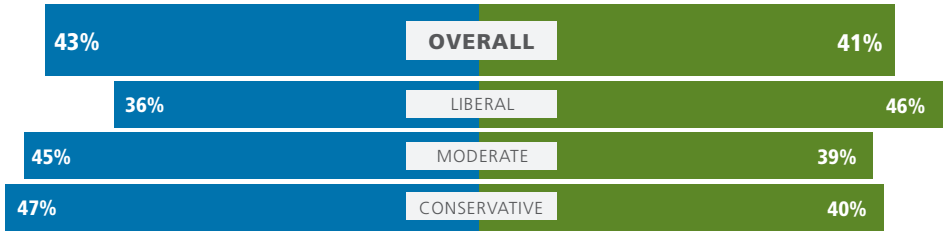


	BOTH EQUALLY	DON'T KNOW
Overall	3%	4%
Liberal	4%	1%
Moderate	4%	6%
Conservative	3%	3%

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT 4.2

A Clearly understand the day-to-day experiences of average Americans

B Clearly understand the complexities of the wider world

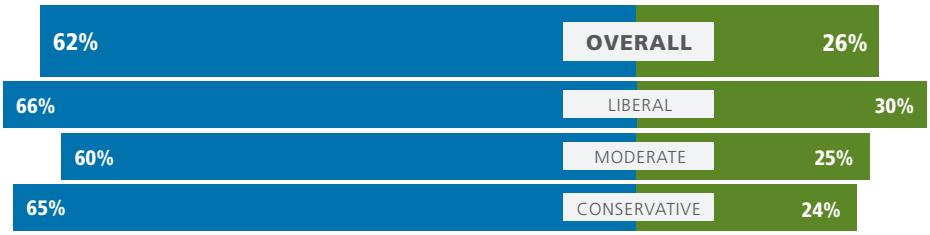


	BOTH EQUALLY	DON'T KNOW
Overall	14%	2%
Liberal	14%	4%
Moderate	11%	5%
Conservative	12%	1%

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT 4.3

A Believe that dissent is good for the country

B Believe that dissent is bad for the country



	BOTH EQUALLY	DON'T KNOW
Overall	2%	10%
Liberal	0%	4%
Moderate	1%	14%
Conservative	2%	9%

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT 4.4

A Make decisions based on fairness, even if they don't help Americans like you

B Make decisions because they benefit Americans like you

	BOTH EQUALLY	DON'T KNOW
Overall	4%	5%
Liberal	1%	4%
Moderate	4%	5%
Conservative	3%	5%

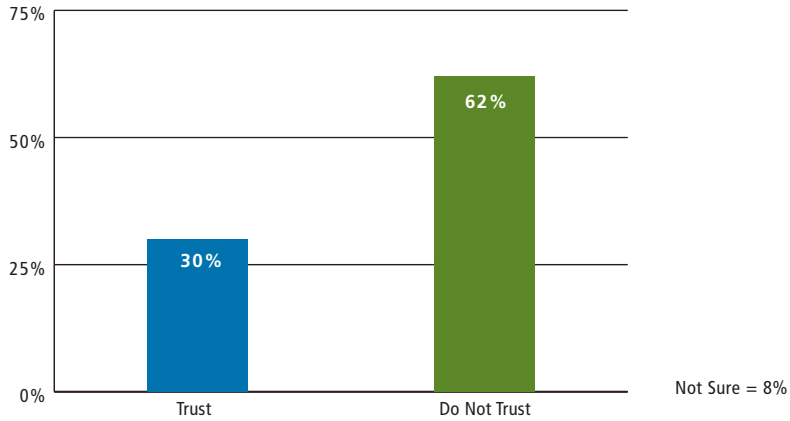
SECTION 3

ELECTION COVERAGE 2008

Leaders in the press have inspired little confidence during each of the four years of the *National Leadership Index* (2005-2008). Given the central role of the news media in covering presidential politics, Americans were asked in 2007 and again in 2008 to evaluate media coverage of the 2008 campaign. This year's results show that Americans continue to have a low opinion of the media's election coverage.

Americans distrust the news media's coverage of the 2008 presidential campaign

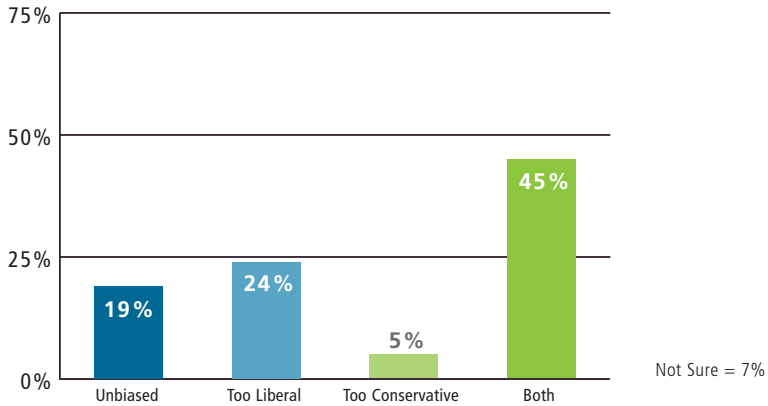
Would you say that you generally trust or do not trust the news media's coverage on the most important aspects of the presidential campaign?



62% of Americans say they do not trust the media's campaign coverage, indicating no improvement from one year ago.

Americans believe media coverage of the 2008 presidential election is politically biased

Do you think that the press coverage of the election is politically biased? If yes, do you think it is too liberal, too conservative, or both, sometimes too liberal and sometimes too conservative?

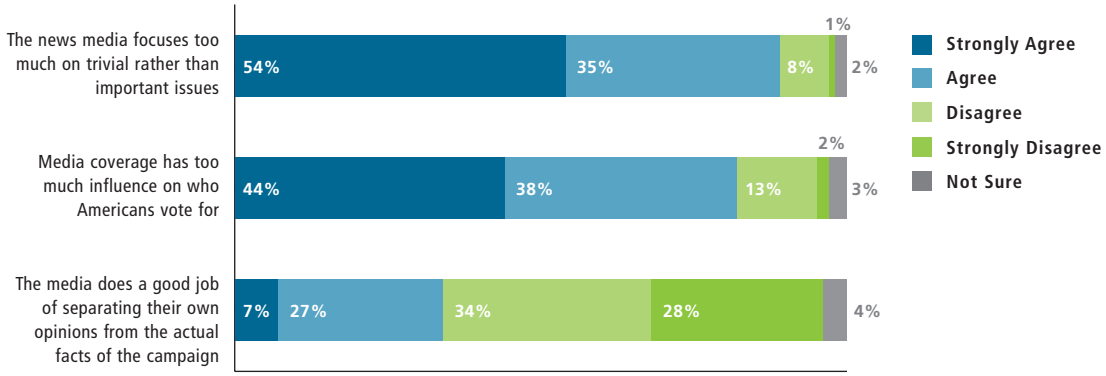


3 out of 4 Americans believe the news media's election coverage is politically biased:

- 24% believe coverage is too liberal
- 5% believe coverage is too conservative
- 45% believe coverage is both, sometimes too liberal and sometimes too conservative
- Only 19% believe coverage is unbiased

Americans believe media coverage of the 2008 presidential election focuses on trivial issues and is too influential

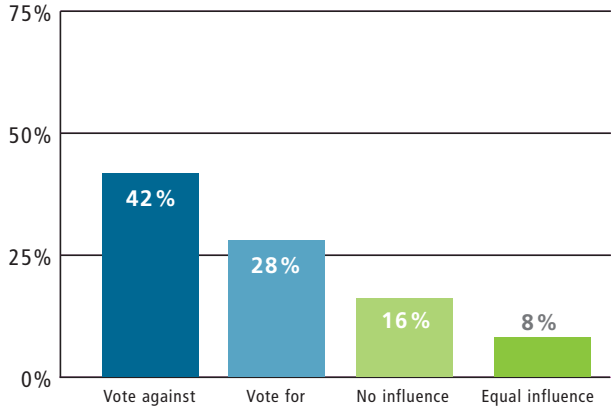
Thinking more about the news media's coverage of presidential campaigns, please tell me whether you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with each of the following statements.



- 89% *agree* or *strongly agree* that the news media focuses too much on trivial rather than important issues
- 82% *agree* or *strongly agree* that media coverage has too much influence on who Americans vote for
- Only 34% *agree* or *strongly agree* that the media does a good job of separating their own opinions from the actual facts of the campaign

Media influences voting more through negative coverage than positive coverage

How would you say the media has influenced your voting decision? Has it provided more positive information about who to vote for, or negative information about who to vote against?



Not sure/Not planning to vote = 6%

42% say media coverage has influenced their voting more by providing negative information about who to vote against, while 28%, say they have been influenced more by positive information about who to vote for.

For more detail on attitudes about media coverage of the 2008 campaign, please see: **www.hks.harvard.edu/leadership/nli**

ABOUT THE STUDY

The National Study of Confidence in Leadership is a social science research program examining the attitudes of the American public toward the nation's leadership. The study includes the *National Leadership Index 2008*, a multidimensional measure of the public's confidence in leadership within different sectors of society. The study was pioneered in 2005 by the Center's Research Director, Professor Todd L. Pittinsky.

Launched in collaboration with *U.S.News & World Report*, the National Study of Confidence in Leadership brings new insights to our understanding of the public's confidence in America's leadership.

For the 2005, 2006, and 2007 *Index* reports, the 2008 press releases, and information on the long-term scope, goals, and contributions of the study, please visit the project website:

http://www.hks.harvard.edu/leadership/nli

METHODS

Survey results were obtained through telephone interviews of a weighted, representative sample of U.S. citizens, 18 years of age or older, in the continental United States.

Study data were collected by the Merriman River Group. A total of 997 respondents were interviewed. Random-digit dialing was used to ensure that individuals with unlisted numbers and cell phones would be included in the study. U.S. Census data were used to weight key demographic dimensions to ensure that the sample was representative of the adult population. Statistical weighting was conducted by Martin R. Frankel, Ph.D.

Interviews were conducted from September 13-22, 2008. Calls were made from 12:00 noon to 9:00 p.m. in each local time zone. The response rate was 28% and the margin of error was ± 3.1% unless otherwise noted.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1 Demographics

Telephone interviews were conducted with a random sample of 997 adult U.S. citizens. The tables present weighted, rounded characteristics of the survey sample.

Table 1.1: Personal Characteristics		PERCENT
Gender	Male	48
	Female	52
Age	18–24	10
	25–34	21
	35–49	29
	50–64	24
	65 & over	16
Median Age		44 (years)
Race/Ethnicity	White	69
	Black	11
	Asian	1
	Hispanic/Latino	13
	Other	5
	Refused	1
Marital Status	Married	56
	Single, never married	19
	Divorced/Separated	13
	Widowed	6
	Living with a partner	6
	Refused	0

Table 1.2: Socioeconomic Position		PERCENT
Education	8th grade or less	3
	Some high school	12
	High school graduate	31
	Some college	27
	College graduate	15
	Postgraduate study	11
	Refused	1
Employment Status	Employed full-time	35
	Employed part-time	9
	Self-employed	16
	Student	4
	Retired	17
	Homemaker	7
	Unemployed	10
	Refused	2
Income	Less than $20,000	12
	$20,000–$34,999	14
	$35,000–$49,999	13
	$50,000–$74,999	17
	$75,000–$99,999	12
	$100,000–$124,999	9
	$125,000–$149,999	4
	$150,000 or above	8
	Refused	11

Table 1.3: Geographic Location		PERCENT
Region	Northeast	19
	Midwest	22
	South	37
	West	22
Community	Big city	17
	Small city	27
	Suburb	22
	Small town	18
	Rural area	15
	Refused	1

Table 1.4: Political and Religious Values/Attitudes		PERCENT
Political Affiliation	Democrat	31
	Republican	24
	Independent	40
	Other	2
	Not Sure/Refused	3
Political Orientation	Very liberal	6
	Liberal	21
	Moderate	34
	Conservative	24
	Very conservative	9
	Other	1
	Not Sure	4
	Refused	1
Do you think that things will be better after the 2008 election, worse after the election, or that things won't change?	Better	39
	Worse	7
	Won't change	25
	Depends who wins	27
	Not Sure	2
Importance of Organized Religion	Very important	39
	Somewhat important	25
	Not very important	14
	Not important at all	21
	Refused	1
Born-Again/ Evangelical Christian	Yes	35
	No, I am neither	59
	Not Sure	3
	Refused	3

Appendix 2

Changes In Confidence By Sector (Alphabetical)

	2005 Mean (*SD*)	2006 Mean (*SD*)	2007 Mean (*SD*)	2008 Mean (*SD*)	Mean change (2007-2008)	Cohen's *d* (2007-2008)
Business	59.3 (26.1)	56.8 (26.1)	58.5 (25.3)	45.0 (29.0)	-13.5	-0.50*
Congressional	55.2 (28.7)	51.7 (28.0)	51.0 (28.5)	42.9 (29.6)	-8.1	-0.28*
Educational	66.1 (27.4)	63.9 (28.0)	61.4 (28.2)	55.3 (29.8)	-6.1	-0.21*
Executive Branch	54.7 (37.2)	51.3 (36.2)	47.7 (35.9)	38.1 (36.2)	-9.6	-0.27*
Local Government	59.2 (28.5)	61.0 (27.8)	56.8 (29.6)	57.7 (28.7)	0.9	0.03
Medical	70.5 (24.4)	69.2 (25.8)	67.5 (26.6)	67.6 (27.3)	0.1	0.00
Military	73.8 (27.3)	72.6 (28.4)	71.7 (29.1)	70.9 (29.9)	-0.8	-0.03
News Media—Alternative	-	-	-	39.5 (30.7)	-	-
News Media—Traditional	-	-	-	46.0 (30.8)	-	-
Nonprofit & Charitable	64.6 (27.5)	64.5 (27.9)	61.0 (26.1)	61.4 (28.3)	0.4	0.01
Press	46.2 (30.6)	46.0 (30.2)	42.0 (30.7)	-	-	-
Religious	64.6 (29.5)	61.9 (30.6)	60.0 (30.3)	52.4 (33.5)	-7.6	-0.24*
State Government	57.0 (29.5)	58.5 (29.7)	59.5 (29.0)	54.9 (29.7)	-4.6	-0.16*
Supreme Court	63.8 (28.7)	63.3 (28.6)	63.4 (28.0)	57.7 (31.1)	-5.7	-0.19*
Confidence, in General, in Leaders of All Sectors	-	-	-	46.4 (24.0)	-	-

NOTES

- For 2005, N = 1,374; for 2006, N = 1,604; for 2007, N = 1,207; for 2008, N = 997
- Data from 2005-2007 *National Leadership Index* reports converted to an equivalent 100-point scale
- Asterisk (*) denotes all changes that are statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level
- Cohen's *d* provides a standardized estimate of the magnitude of the difference in means (effect size), which is calculated by dividing the difference in means by the pooled standard deviation
- Responses of *Not Sure*, *Don't Know*, *Both/All Equally*, *No Influence*, *Equal Influence*, *Not Planning to Vote*, and *Depends Who Wins* were all volunteered by respondents.
- The sample size (N) for all analyses is 997, and the margin of error is ±3.1%, except for analyses divided by political orientation, for which the Ns and margins of errors are: liberal, N = 275, ±5.9%; moderate, N = 344, ±5.3%; conservative, N = 330, ±5.4%

Center for Public Leadership

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Based in Connecticut, Merriman is currently developing a next-generation voting system to use in both public and private elections. For more information on the Merriman River Group, please visit their website, www.merrimanriver.com.

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